Real action is on Internet's side stages

E-BIZ

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It's the silly season. The world is going gaga about the on-line Christmas shopping circus. But while the main show might be interesting, the real action is occurring on the smaller side-stages, where subtle and far-reaching changes are coming to affect every industry.

Take the world of health care: With the Internet, the centuries-old relationship between doctor and patient is changing, as more and more people look up medical information on-line.

Want to understand the revolution occurring in health care? Do a quick survey in your office, and you'll probably find that most people have looked up some type of medical information on the Net.

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Surveys bear this out: A 1997 report by Ernst & Young indicated that one-third of Canadians prefer to conduct their own research into their medical situation. They flock to the Internet to do so, a not surprising situation given that it is believed that at least 10 per cent of the information on-line is related to health care.

What this has led to is a situation in which patients are far more likely to question their family physician or specialist about the advice being provided to them, or are using the Internet to better understand their medical circumstances.

Of course, this fact has alarmed many in the medical profession, and rightly so, given that there is a stunning amount of fraudulent and misleading health care information on-line. Any doctor will tell you that it is very difficult to dissuade patients from believing something they have learned on the Internet.

Even though there is some lousy medical information available on-line, there is a lot of useful, high-quality information available too. A line of thought has emerged in some quarters that the medical community and health care industry should help the patient use the Internet intelligently.

Some believe that if this can be done, then we can slowly and carefully reduce the demand on increasingly scarce health-care resources. After all, a better educated and more informed patient is one who will be less likely to run into the emergency room or doctor's office for each and every minor problem.

This trend is particularly advanced in the United States, where a number of health management organizations (HMOs) and medical insurance companies are rolling out sophisticated sites to help patients make the Internet a basic part of their health care.

United HealthCare, for example, is investing heavily to make sure that its more than 4.6 million health plan members nationwide can use the Internet to access customized health care information relevant to their condition.

Then there is the impact of E-commerce. Anyone remotely connected with the health care industry knows that it is extremely paperwork-intensive: The U.S. Healthcare Financing Administration indicates that the cost of medical paperwork is approaching $10-billion (U.S.) a year.

While no one is brave enough to suggest that the Internet will lead to the "paperless medical office," everyone knows there is a massive opportunity to re-engineer the financial transactions that flow through the system.

There are many E-commerce initiatives under way throughout the health care sector that involve government, insurance companies, health care institutions, pharmaceutical organizations and countless others.

Then there is the world of medical equipment. Empire Blue Cross/Blue Shield of New York is working with Health Hero Network (**www.healthhero.com/**) to put in place a program by which the medical condition of congestive heart failure patients can be remotely monitored using a "health buddy personal information appliance."

As medical technology becomes plugged into the Internet, the concept of home care becomes more practical and cost-effective.

Those who look for the signposts can see that we are on the edge of a revolution in health care, as a result of the Internet and E-commerce.

Jim Carroll's column will be moving to Monday, starting Dec. 6. He is co-author of Light Bulbs to Yottabits: How to Profit by Understanding the Internet of the Future, *and can be reached by E-mail at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com*